

Analysis of Jack London's use of narrative perspective and symbolism to construct White Fang's understanding of life in White Fang

Research Question: How does Jack London's use of narrative perspective and symbolism construct White Fang's understanding of life in White Fang?

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1 Introduction

Jack London (born in 1876 and died in 1916) was a famous American novelist and short-story writer. Jack London embarked on an adventurous life in San Francisco Bay. He poached oysters, worked as a crewmember on ships, and travelled across the United States. His works were deeply influenced by his experiences during the Klondike Gold Rush in Yukon territory, Canada. Published in 1906, *White Fang* explores the psychological and moral development of a wolf-dog living between the wilderness and civilization. Unlike conventional novels centered on human protagonists, *White Fang* offers a rare and compelling exploration of life narrated from a canine perspective.

The research question, “*How does Jack London’s use of narrative perspective and symbolism construct White Fang’s understanding of life in White Fang?*” seeks to investigate White Fang’s worldview from birth to late adulthood. This essay argues that London employs naturalist narrative techniques such as symbolism and third-person omniscient narration to construct White Fang’s understanding of existence. The narrative particularly suggests environmental determinism, in which the protagonist struggles against forces beyond his control and is shaped by the environment he inhabits.

In this essay, White Fang’s journey will unfold across four distinct developmental stages, namely the cub stage, young adulthood, adulthood, and late adulthood, which are represented by White Fang’s relationship with different types of caregivers or owners. Through successive stages of development shaped by nature and nurture, White Fang’s worldview evolves from instinctive survival to disciplined obedience and ultimately to emotional attachment and love.

As Karen Jones proclaims, *“White Fang communicated Jack London’s attempts to explore canine consciousness. The novel depicts experiences of an arctic wolf forced into a domestic sphere and offers a canine perspective on issues of evolution, species behavior, and environmental conditioning.”* (Jones, 208).

Jack London’s narration demonstrates a chain of cause and effect similar to scientific observation. Throughout the novel, wilderness is almost depicted as a mechanistic force that punishes weakness and rewards adaptation. Through objective narration, deterministic structure, and realistic detail, London explores how beings are influenced by different factors in life. Such influences can be divided into two categories, genetic and external. Genetics being: genes, other biological and hereditary factors; and external being: environmental factors, social surroundings, and experiences. *White Fang* is worth examining as it reflects London’s projected experience embodied in a wolf form, from a vivid viewpoint. Jack London mainly uses detailed sensory descriptions to help readers perceive the world as *White Fang* experiences it.

In this essay, it will be discussed that *White Fang*'s inner world and perspective on life change due to survival instincts, environmental conditions, and human engagement, and that Jack London’s use of naturalist literary style and symbolism is effective in drawing such a thesis.

2 Investigating White Fang's Inner World (Thoughts, Emotions, Instincts, Desires) Through the Time Periods

White Fang's early life in the wilderness establishes the novel's naturalist foundation. Born in a harsh, unforgiving environment, the protagonist immediately faces the struggle for existence and ultimately survival. Before discussing the cub stage, it should be noted that the first three chapters of the novel are intentionally devoted to a different storyline. This background narrative implicitly creates the theme of the "wilderness". The "Wild" is described as hostile and indifferent. *"It is not the way of the Wild to like movement. Life is an offence to it. For life is movement, and the Wild aims always to destroy movement."* (London, 4). London presents the environment as an active antagonist. Furthermore, in his storytelling, the "Wild" is personified as a force against life. This further assists the reader in grasping the harsh conditions of the wild.

In addition, as a third-person omniscient narrator, Jack London's usage of a wild animal's perspective can be considered proof of his naturalist literary style. By the decision to choose the main character as a canine, London portrays an insider realm of nature: *"And then shame came to him. He knew laughter and the meaning of it. It is not given us to know how some animals know laughter, and know when they are being laughed at ; but it was this same way that White Fang knew it. And he felt shame that the man-animals should be laughing at him"* (London, 127). Jack London's naturalistic narration shapes White Fang's outlook on life as the readers witness his adaptation process through his eyes.

2.1 Cub Stage

In this period of White Fang's life, Jack London reveals the stages of the animal's thought process, starting from the moment the protagonist is partially conscious in the burrow. London portrays the protagonist's early attempts to explore his environment with undeveloped senses such as touch, taste, and smell. This is followed by learning through experience and making simple generalizations, such as the distinction between living things and non-living things, in his "*misty mind*" (London, 90). This stage can be compared to a human's initial steps in life, as well as to the novelty of White Fang's early experiences. White Fang explores his curiosity, and fear urges him to retreat, but growth drives him on.

London emphasizes the naturalist point of view that life is a biological imperative. The citation, "*The life of his body, and of every fiber of his body, the life that was the very substance of his body and that was apart from his own personal life, had yearned toward this light and urged his body toward it in the same way that the cunning chemistry of a plant urges it toward the sun.*" (London, 77-78) provides an example of how unconsciously many habitual actions are performed. It represents an inherent biological drive to live rather than a conscious act by likening White Fang to a plant turning toward the sun. Jack London was strongly influenced by Charles Darwin and evolutionary theory. Thus, he placed special emphasis on the instinctive actions performed by an animal without any experience, without their knowing for what purpose it is performed.

As White Fang becomes aware of his strengths and weaknesses, he learns when to be bold and when to be cautious. Subsequently, he realizes his desire to kill. Through the thrill of killing, he recognizes his own meaning in the world and thus justifies his existence.

In this case, his understanding shifts from a meaningless haze to a physical purpose: kill to live. This is an example of Jack London's emphasis on the harsh realities of life shaped by natural laws. London describes events such as hunger, hurt, fear, obedience, and dominance through an unsentimental lens, which further enhances the reader's understanding of the canine's thought process. *"This was a source of enjoyment to him... At the same time he was made aware of a sensation of hunger. His jaws closed together. There was a crunching of fragile bones, and warm blood ran in his mouth."* (London, 92) These descriptive passages often highlight physical settings and bodily sensations to create a sense of realism with the aim of engaging the reader.

In this stage, White Fang relies on his senses to understand life. As Hernandez argues, Jack London uses the stream as a symbol of the treacherousness and unpredictability of the wild (Hernandez, 49). When the cub steps on the stream, as the stream appears to be an even surface of solid consistency, he experiences suffocation. *"White Fang's experience in the stream teaches him that the reality of what appears to the senses must be tested through empirical inquiry, for only then, the narrator tells us, is the faith that he puts into a thing warranted. The only useful knowledge in the wild, London implies, is empirically derived."* (Hernandez, 49).

White Fang has a survival-focused and simplified worldview compared to humans, as conveyed through Jack London's choice of narration. London's third-person omniscient narrator grants the reader access to his primal thought process: *"He was never disturbed over why a thing happened. How it happened was sufficient for him."* (London, 81). This illustrates a worldview defined by immediate survival. Jack London reinforces this with the quote, *"But the cub did not think in man-fashion. He did not look at things with a wide*

vision. He was single-purposed, and entertained but one thought or desire at a time." (London, 85). Yet there comes a time when he experiences disconnections between his mind and instincts. This limited yet logical reasoning reflects London's third-person perspective, closely aligned with animal consciousness.

White Fang creates rules that shape his worldview. Ultimately, his perspective shifts as he begins to make some conscious decisions after discovering that "limitations and restraints are laws" in order to avoid being hurt and to reach for happiness. The most important discovery of this period is the "law of meat" (London, 101): "*Life itself was meat. Life lived on life. There were eaters and the eaten. The law was: EAT OR BE EATEN.*" (London, 107). London uses capital letters in "EAT OR BE EATEN" to signify that this is the cub's moral compass in the decision-making process. Life becomes a mechanical system of predators and prey. White Fang's perspective is constructed around Darwinian struggle, reinforcing naturalist principles of the survival of the fittest. Moreover, Harshita Urs argues that the ideas of Darwinism dominate London's writings as he furthers the idea of '*survival of the fittest.*' (Urs, 57).

Overall, in the cub stage, it can be concluded that London portrays the protagonist acting according to his primal instincts, content and proud of his remuneration, and enjoying his life in the wild.

2.2 Young Adult: The Gods and the Clay

In this stage, White Fang is domesticated by a Native, Gray Beaver, and brought to a camp. London portrays changes in White Fang's perspective of independence and lays his path towards submission. The reader could trace the character as a young

independent wolf turning into some version of an obedient dog. Emphasis is placed on emotions and instincts of the young adult, such as feeling small, the pressure of obedience, and fear of being hurt.

London portrays White Fang's first encounter with humans as a great awe and constructs the humans as a superior evolutionary force in the eyes of White Fang. Jack London emphasizes "heritage" as a defining factor in decision-making. *"The cub had never seen man, yet the instinct concerning man was his. ...The spell of the cub's heritage was upon him, the fear and the respect born of the centuries of struggle and the accumulated experience of the generations."* (London, 113-114). Quotation suggests that White Fang's understanding of life is sometimes based on heritage, a biological drive.

In addition to the notion of heritage, Jack London also provides an insight into White Fang's thought and categorization processes regarding humans. The domination of fire is a turning point in human history, ensuring warmth, lighting, safety, and substantial positive dietary changes. Jack London uses symbolism of "fire" to portray humans' vast control over nature, leading White Fang, the protagonist, to conclude that "the man-animals" have God like qualities: *"They were creatures of mastery, possessing all manners of unknown and impossible potencies, overlords of the alive and the not alive – making obey that which moved, imparting movement to that which did not move, and making life, sun-colored and biting life, to grow out of dead moss and wood. They were fire-makers! They were gods!"* (London, 129), which contributes to his admiration for humans. The narration conveys not only admiration but conditioned recognition of dominance, introducing power and hierarchy through symbolism. Human mastery over nature shifts White Fang's perspective from independence to a reluctant submission.

Jack London depicts White Fang experiencing conflicts, torn between his instinct to rebel against humans and his fear of being hurt, which drives his obedience. After a while, White Fang, having become accustomed to his owner, cannot conceive of a life outside the one he shares with humans. On one hand, his instinct calls him to the wild; on the other hand, he desires to live a relatively secure life, safe and far from the various dangers of harsh living conditions. White Fang manages to control his instincts and obey the rules set by his masters. This decision reveals a great deal about the transformation he has undergone in terms of perspective. Once resentful of living with humans, he now willingly stays close to them. While depicting these conflicting cases, Jack London uses an observational tone and avoids moral judgment.

White Fang becomes adept at fighting mostly because of the constant harassment coming from the pack. He is good at judging time and distance. *"Body and brain, his was a more perfected mechanism."* (London, 194). To the average animal, he was superior to the other dogs. The superiority and aggression originate from his perspective, which allows him to progress for the purpose of surviving and avoiding hurt.

A critical literary device in this section is the metaphor of the "clay." London refers to White Fang's nature as a clay that is molded into form by the environment. *"His heredity was a life-stuff that may be likened to clay. It possessed many possibilities and was capable of being moulded into many different forms. The environment served to model the clay, to give it a particular form. Thus, had White Fang never come into the fires of man, the Wild would have moulded him into a true wolf. But the gods had given him a different environment, and he was moulded into a dog that was rather wolfish, but that was a dog and not a wolf."* (London, 177). This metaphor, bolstered by repetition, suggests

how certain events and the surroundings have an influence on identity and perspective formation, as well as the endless possibilities that remain within occurrences. It should be noted that Jack London frequently emphasizes this idea symbolized by “clay” throughout the novel. Some other examples of use of “clay” in *White Fang* are as follows:

“His heredity was a life-stuff that may be likened to clay.” (London, 177).

“The clay of White Fang had been moulded until he became what he was, morose and lonely, unloving and ferocious, the enemy of all his kind.” (London, 201).

“This had constituted the clay of him, and it had not been kindly moulded by the world.” (London, 211).

“This faithfulness was a quality of the clay that composed him.” (London, 212).

“It was another instance of the plasticity of his clay, of his capacity for being moulded by the pressure of environment.” (London, 220).

London presents different scenarios and reinforces the reader's perception of the concept. Throughout the novel, “Clay” is referred to sometimes as biological factors and sometimes as environmental factors. This highlights the theme of biological and environmental determinism once again. At the end of this stage, the reader may conclude that *White Fang*’s inner world and perspective on life change due to heredity and environment.

2.3 Adulthood: Mad God Beauty Smith and the "Fighting Wolf"

Jack London sets up the major theme of this part as violence. The most harrowing shift in *White Fang*’s inner world occurs under the ownership of Beauty Smith. *White Fang* becomes a fighting machine, caged and brutalized. His identity merges with violence. At

this stage, White Fang's inner world grows darker, and he becomes an enemy not only of his own kind but of everything around him.

Jack London portrays White Fang as a "fiend", reflecting his owner's reign of hate, which in turn transforms White Fang's perspective into one of pure, distilled hatred. The focalization shifts to emphasize fighting, reflecting primitiveness. (Paraphrased from ChatGPT).

London uses literary devices to convey the hatred White Fang perceives. The usage of the metaphorical imagery "cold hatred" when describing the environment highlights the emotion and its severity. The word "cold" has a negative meaning throughout the novel, starting from the portrayal of the Wild. "Cold" being afflicted with hatred demonstrates the ruthlessness, rigidity, and remoteness White Fang experiences. This adds to the narrative and operates as a strategic application to White Fang's point of view while developing the readers' involvement.

The setting and White Fang's thoughts towards the setting reveal the tone and assist in conveying the distress White Fang is in. The sentences: "*He hated the chain that bound him, the men who peered in at him through the slats of the pen.*" (London 215) "*He hated the very wood of the pen that confined him,*" (London, 216) present strong hostility regarding his state. The hostility and the environment are tied, displaying how the environment can shape emotion and perspective.

As mentioned in the previous chapter of this essay, the literary symbol clay is again encountered within the quotation: "*They were moulding the clay of him into a more ferocious thing than had been intended by Nature.*" (London, 218). The quotation

illustrates how White Fang is pushed to his limits by the environment he is in. After all, clay is a formable substance and is emphasized by the extent to which it can change. In this case, White Fang's adaptation to survive is similar to structuring clay. The adaptation is forced by external factors and intense violence, which bypasses White Fang's default origin by nature, accentuating environmental determinism. Additionally, in the same quote, nature is depicted as a being with a will by the phrase "intended by Nature". Therefore, London's approach to the naturalist views is aided by this personification.

In this section, Jack London's visualization of the "Fighting Wolf" is remarkably realistic. During his near-fatal fight with the bulldog, London strips away all higher reasoning but mere instinct. *"The basic life that was in him took charge of him. The will to exist of his body surged over him. He was dominated by this mere flesh-love of life. All intelligence was gone. It was as though he had no brain. His reason was unseated by the blind yearning of the flesh to exist and move, at all hazards to move, to continue to move, for movement was the expression of its existence."* (London, 228) At this moment, White Fang is reduced to pure biological impulse. Intelligence disappears; instinct dominates. This passage reflects an organism driven by flesh and survival instinct alone. At this point in the novel, London's shaping of White Fang's perspective is overwhelmingly naturalistic. Here, the shaping of White Fang's perspective is almost entirely external and material. His worldview narrows to mechanical endurance. This idea is also supported by Guang, *"...Jack London skillfully uses philosophical ideas to advance the story's plot. This is Darwinism, the idea that the process of natural selection acting on demographic change will lead to the survival of the best competitors and the continuous improvement of the population."* (Guang, 108).

Furthermore, the concept of White Fang's strong "will to live" is a prominent feature throughout the novel. This idea recurs on many occasions and reinforces the naturalist emphasis on instinct and evolutionary force. Some other examples of "will to live" in White Fang are as follows:

"But endure it he must, or perish, and the life that was in him had no desire to perish." (London, 187).

"His feet clung to the earth with the same tenacity that he clung to life." (London, 191).

"His clutch on life was too strong." (London, 213-214).

"There was the tenacity with which he clung to the earth." (London, 220).

"He was dominated by this mere flesh-love of life." (London, 228).

"A constitution of iron and the vitality of the Wild were White Fang's inheritance, and he clung to life," (London, 323)

The ongoing struggle between the strong and the weak, the tendency to establish dominance, and the strong "will to live" are embodied in the protagonist within the framework of the observational realism that London adopts. As stated in the examples, London reinforces this understanding by using direct and simple sentences serving to convey complex ideas.

2.4 Late Adulthood: The Love Master

Late adulthood refers to the time period when White Fang is with his latest and most merciful owner. This stage revolves around the event of White Fang being rescued by a character named Weedon Scott from his previous owner. This event can be

considered an intersection of White Fang's two distinct lives under the guardianship of two different owners. The emphasis on the bond of loyalty established between White Fang and his master serves the purpose of illustrating the theme of hope and transformation despite the conflict between humans and nature.

As expressed in the final part of the novel, White Fang, a wild wolf, experiences 'love' alongside his master, who saved his life, discovers the power of this affection, and at the same time begins to adapt to a completely new life with humans.

There is a sharp contrast between the way White Fang had been treated his whole life and the way Weedon Scott treats him. Such contrast works as a tool to highlight the message that suggests, even though things might seem hopeless, and rigid changes can still occur. He had been ruthless and full of hatred towards everything, yet he managed to change with external factors to evolve into a being who is capable of affection.

White Fang, who feels great admiration for Weedon Scott, finds the opportunity to experience the feeling of love in his master's presence, whose character is presented with a "savior" identity. In this stage, White Fang learns control and poise, more importantly, learns "to laugh". Karen Jones argues that, "...*London articulated his own sentiments on wilderness and civilization: offering an essentially sociological reading of animal behavior, based around a Darwinian conception of man as a fighting animal.*" (Jones, 209).

The final stage of White Fang's evolution, triggered by Weedon Scott, introduces the most significant ideological shift: Sentimentalism. London complicates his own naturalist determinism and the pessimistic, harsh realism in this part. While the transformation still operates within naturalist logic, a new environment generates new

behavior, and the transformation shifts from survival to love, instinct to consciousness. London conveys: *"Kindness touches to life potencies that had languished and well-nigh perished. One such potency was love. It took the place of like, which latter had been the highest feeling that thrilled him in his intercourse with the gods."* (London, 256). The use of the word "potencies" suggests that White Fang always possessed a latent capacity for affection, but required a specific environmental catalyst to realize it. As expressed in the final part of the novel, White Fang, a wild wolf, experiences 'love' alongside his master, who saved his life, discovers the power of this affection, and at the same time begins to adapt to a completely new life intertwined with humans.

The conclusion of the narrative frames the plot around White Fang, a wild animal, gradually shedding his former identity and approaching the human species by discovering the strength of key emotions under the compassionate care of his master. At the end of the plot, White Fang sacrifices himself to save his master's father's life and is consequently declared "Blessed Wolf" (London, 325). Blessed wolf symbolizes the acceptance of White Fang into the family of Weedon Scott as a precious, almost holy being with a constant place as a family member.

The novel ultimately resists complete naturalist pessimism. In its final movement toward loyalty and love, London softens determinism and suggests that the transformative power of compassion is possible. While perspective is initially constructed as biologically and environmentally conditioned, the introduction of compassion complicates this rigidity. White Fang's final transformation implies that existence is not governed solely by struggle, but also by relational connection.

3 Conclusion

The positivist worldview, which 19th-century materialists particularly used as a source for explaining the workings of the universe, social events, and economic models, played a significant role in shaping the thematic unity of Jack London's novels, including *White Fang*. The general perspective adopted in *White Fang* revolves around certain main themes shaped by materialist connotations, such as the unlimited control of the laws of nature over the lives of all living beings, determining their actions, and the necessity for the weak to submit to the strong in nature.

As is known, primary needs such as food, water, shelter, safety, and protection are the main necessities that both animals and, as *White Fang* puts “non-animals” need to live and survive from death. In the novel, Jack London emphasizes this simple, natural law in different scenarios.

Jack London devoted attention to creating *White Fang* as a multi-layered literary character. The protagonist experiences gradual changes in his inner world from birth to late adulthood; he sometimes surrenders to his ancient instincts, acting like a raging primitive, and at other times concedes domestication by almost conscious choice. The main factor influencing these decisions within the broad spectrum of choices is “adaptation”. Influenced by Darwin, adaptation is depicted as “a must” to survive.

To a great extent, Jack London uses naturalist narrative techniques and symbolism to shape *White Fang*’s evolving perspective on life. By maintaining a neutral, observational tone, narration describes life “as is” without romanticizing, but realistically. Environmental determinism, one of the tenets of naturalism that suggests environmental

factors have a deep impact on the course of a species (Durmus, Mavis, 82), is dominating the novel. Throughout the novel, Jack London describes the harsh living conditions of the wild, the threat of famine and other predators, and the struggle for survival in detail.

London's descriptive imagery, revealed through the canine protagonist's perspective (combined with storytelling), allows the reader to witness the character's psychological and moral evolution through a series of events. Jack London's observational realism is mainly pessimistic and reflected in the novel through violence, obedience and dominance, suffering, and conflict.

The novel presents a comprehensive understanding of social, biological, and psychological forces at play. Through biological instinct, environmental determinism, empirical learning, and Darwinian struggle, White Fang's worldview is constructed as a product of heredity and environment. His understanding of life shifts from the law of meat to submission to power, to hardened violence, and ultimately love, each stage molded by external forces. Jack London's use of naturalist literary style and use of third-person omniscient narrator and symbolism, such as "fire" and "clay", are the main factors in reaching this conclusion.

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